

1                   **ASYNCHRONOUSLY-RESETTABLE DECODER WITH REDUNDANCY**

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION(S)

5           The present application claims the benefit of the filing dates of the following United States Provisional Patent Applications, the contents of all of which are hereby expressly incorporated herein by reference:

10           Serial No. 60/215,741, filed June 29, 2000, and entitled MEMORY MODULE WITH HIERARCHICAL FUNCTIONALITY;

          Serial No. 60/193,607, filed March 31, 2000, and entitled MEMORY REDUNDANCY IMPLEMENTATION;

          Serial No. 60/193,606, filed March 31, 2000, and entitled DIFFUSION REPLICA DELAY CIRCUIT;

15           Serial No. 60/179,777, filed February 2, 2000, and entitled SPLIT DUMMY BITLINES FOR FAST, LOW POWER MEMORY;

          Serial No. 60/193,605, filed March 31, 2000, and entitled A CIRCUIT TECHNIQUE FOR HIGH SPEED LOW POWER DATA TRANSFER BUS;

20           Serial No. 60/179,766, filed February 2, 2000, and entitled FAST DECODER WITH ASYNCHRONOUS RESET;

          Serial No. 60/220,567, filed July 25, 2000, and entitled FAST DECODER WITH ROW REDUNDANCY;

          Serial No. 60/179,866, filed February 2, 2000, and entitled HIGH PRECISION DELAY MEASUREMENT CIRCUIT;

25           Serial No. 60/179,718, filed February 2, 2000, and entitled LIMITED SWING DRIVER CIRCUIT;

          Serial No. 60/179,765, filed February 2, 2000, and entitled SINGLE-ENDED SENSE AMPLIFIER WITH SAMPLE-AND-HOLD REFERENCE;

30           Serial No. 60/179,768, filed February 2, 2000, and entitled SENSE AMPLIFIER WITH OFFSET CANCELLATION AND CHARGE-SHARE LIMITED SWING DRIVERS; and

          Serial No. 60/179,865, filed February 2, 2000, and entitled MEMORY ARCHITECTURE WITH SINGLE PORT CELL AND DUAL PORT (READ AND WRITE) FUNCTIONALITY.

1 The following patent applications, assigned to the same  
 assignee hereof and filed on even date herewith in the names of  
 the same inventors as the present application, disclose related  
 subject matter, with the subject of each being incorporated by  
 5 reference herein in its entirety:

Memory Module with Hierarchical Functionality, Attorney  
 Docket No. 40050/B600/JFO; High Precision Delay Measurement  
 Circuit, Attorney Docket No. 37079/B600/JFO; Single-Ended Sense  
 Amplifier with Sample-and-Hold Reference, Attorney Docket No.  
 10 37362/B600/JFO; Limited Switch Driver Circuit, Attorney Docket  
 No. 37361/B600/JFO; Fast Decoder with Asynchronous Reset with Row  
 Redundancy; Attorney Docket No. 37115/B600/JFO; Diffusion Replica  
 Delay Circuit, Attorney Docket No. 37360/B600/JFO; Sense  
 Amplifier with Offset Cancellation and Charge-Share Limited Swing  
 15 Drivers, Attorney Docket No. 37363/B600/JFO; Memory Architecture  
 with Single-Port Cell and Dual-Port (Read and Write)  
 Functionality, Attorney Docket No. 37364/B600/JFO; Memory  
 Redundancy Implementation, Attorney Docket No. 37496/B600/JFO;  
 and; A Circuit Technique for High Speed Low Power Data Transfer  
 20 Bus, Attorney Docket No. 37497/B600/JFO.

## BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

### 1. Field of the Invention

25 The present invention relates to memory devices, in  
 particular, semiconductor memory devices, and most particularly,  
 scalable, power-efficient semiconductor memory devices.

### 2. Background of the Art

30 Memory structures have become integral parts of modern VLSI  
 systems, including digital signal processing systems. Although  
 it typically is desirable to incorporate as many memory cells as  
 possible into a given area, memory cell density is usually  
 constrained by other design factors such as layout efficiency,  
 performance, power requirements, and noise sensitivity.

1 In view of the trends toward compact, high-performance,  
high-bandwidth integrated computer networks, portable computing,  
and mobile communications, the aforementioned constraints can  
impose severe limitations upon memory structure designs, which  
5 traditional memory system and subcomponent implementations may  
fail to obviate.

One type of basic storage element is the static random  
access memory (SRAM), which can retain its memory state without  
the need for refreshing as long as power is applied to the cell.  
10 In an SRAM device, the memory state is usually stored as a  
voltage differential within a bistable functional element, such  
as an inverter loop. A SRAM cell is more complex than a  
counterpart dynamic RAM (DRAM) cell, requiring a greater number  
of constituent elements, preferably transistors. Accordingly,  
15 SRAM devices commonly consume more power and dissipate more heat  
than a DRAM of comparable memory density, thus efficient; lower-  
power SRAM device designs are particularly suitable for VLSI  
systems having need for high-density SRAM components, providing  
those memory components observe the often strict overall design  
20 constraints of the particular VLSI system. Furthermore, the SRAM  
subsystems of many VLSI systems frequently are integrated  
relative to particular design implementations, with specific  
adaptions of the SRAM subsystem limiting, or even precluding, the  
scalability of the SRAM subsystem design. As a result SRAM  
25 memory subsystem designs, even those considered to be "scalable",  
often fail to meet design limitations once these memory subsystem  
designs are scaled-up for use in a VLSI system with need for a  
greater memory cell population and/or density.

There is a need for an efficient, scalable, high-  
30 performance, low-power memory structure that allows a system  
designer to create a SRAM memory subsystem that satisfies strict  
constraints for device area, power, performance, noise  
sensitivity, and the like.

## 1 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

2 The present invention satisfies the above needs by providing  
3 in a memory module having memory cell groups, a decoder having  
4 a synchronous portion, which receives and responds to a clocked  
5 signal; an asynchronous portion which is coupled with an  
6 asynchronous circuit in a selected memory cell group of the  
7 module; and a feedback-resetting portion, coupled with, and  
8 interposed between the synchronous portion and the asynchronous  
9 portion, which substantially isolates the synchronous portion  
10 from the asynchronous portion in response to a predetermined  
11 asynchronous reset signal, which can be a monitor signal from a  
12 monitor node. Also, the decoder can include an inverter and  
13 multiple buffer stages, which can be skewed relative to each  
14 other, so that load capacitance is thereby reduced. The decoder  
15 can be a row decoder, disposed to be a asynchronously-resettable  
16 row decoder, as well as a column decoder, disposed to be an  
17 asynchronously-resettable column decoder.

18 In another embodiment according to the present invention,  
19 a decoder can have a signal input; a first memory output coupled  
20 with a first memory cell group; a second memory output coupled  
21 with a second memory cell group; and a selector coupled between  
22 the signal input, the first memory output, and the second memory  
23 output. The selector can include a multiplexer which selects  
24 between the first and second memory cell groups. Typically, the  
25 decoder decodes the first memory cell group. However, in  
26 response to a group-select signal, the decoder also can select  
27 and decode the second memory cell group. The memory cell groups  
28 can be adjacent memory cells within the memory module, or an  
29 assigned memory cell and a redundant memory cell. This decoder  
30 is suitable for employing as a row decoder, where the memory cell  
31 groups are memory rows, as well as a column decoder, where the  
32 memory cell groups are memory columns.

33 Furthermore, in another embodiment of the present invention,  
34 a decoder can combine the features and functionality of the  
35 aforementioned decoders to provide an asynchronously-resettable

1 decoder with redundancy. Such a decoder have a synchronous  
portion, which receives and responds to a clocked signal; an  
asynchronous portion which is coupled with an asynchronous  
circuit in a selected memory cell group of the module; a  
5 feedback-resetting portion, coupled with, and interposed between  
the synchronous portion and the asynchronous portion, which  
substantially isolates the synchronous portion from the  
asynchronous portion in response to a predetermined asynchronous  
reset signal; a signal input; a first memory output coupled with  
10 a first memory cell group; a second memory output coupled with  
a second memory cell group; and a selector coupled between the  
signal input, the first memory output, and the second memory  
output. This decoder can be memory row-oriented, and thus provide  
an asynchronously-resettable row decoder with row redundancy, or  
15 an asynchronously-resettable column decoder with column  
redundancy.

The present invention will be more fully understood from the  
following detailed description of the embodiments thereof, taken  
together with the following drawings.

#### 20 BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

These and other features, aspects and advantages of the  
present invention will be more fully understood when considered  
with respect to the following detailed description, appended  
25 claims and accompanying drawings, wherein:

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of an exemplary static random  
access memory (SRAM) architecture;

FIG. 2 is a general circuit schematic of an exemplary six-  
transistor CMOS SRAM memory cell;

30 FIG. 3 is a block diagram of an embodiment of a hierarchical  
memory module using local bitline sensing, according to the  
present invention;

FIG. 4 is a block diagram of an embodiment of a hierarchical  
memory module using an alternative local bitline sensing  
35 structure;

1 FIG. 5 is a block diagram of an exemplary two-dimensional, two-tier hierarchical memory structure, employing plural local bitline sensing modules of FIG.3;

5 FIG. 6 is a block diagram of an exemplary hierarchical memory structure depicting a memory module employing both local word line decoding and local bitline sensing structures;

FIG. 7 is a perspective illustration of a hierarchical memory structure having a three-tier hierarchy, in accordance with the invention herein;

10 FIG. 8 is a circuit schematic of an asynchronously-resettable decoder, according to an aspect of the present invention;

FIG. 9 is a circuit schematic of a limited swing driver circuit, according to an aspect of the present invention;

15 FIG. 10 is a circuit schematic of a single-ended sense amplifier circuit with sample-and-hold reference, according to an aspect of the present invention;

FIG. 11 is a circuit schematic of charge-share, limited-swing driver sense amplifier circuit, according to an aspect of the present invention;

20 FIG. 12 is a block diagram illustrating an embodiment of hierarchical memory module redundancy;

FIG. 13 is a block diagram illustrating another embodiment of hierarchical memory module redundancy;

25 FIG. 14 is a block diagram of a memory redundancy device, illustrating yet another embodiment of hierarchical memory module redundancy;

30 FIG. 15A is a diagrammatic representation of the signal flow of an exemplary unfaulted memory module featuring column-oriented redundancy;

FIG. 15B is a diagrammatic representation of the shifted signal flow of the exemplary faulted memory module illustrated in FIG. 15A;

1 FIG. 16 is a generalized block diagram of a redundancy selector circuit, illustrating still another embodiment of hierarchical memory module redundancy;

5 FIG. 17 is a circuit schematic of an embodiment of a global row decoder having row redundancy according to the invention herein;

10 FIG. 18 is a block diagram illustrating dual-port functionality in a single-port hierarchical memory structure employing hierarchical memory modules according to the present invention;

FIG. 19 is a schematic diagram of one embodiment of a high precision delay measurement circuit, according to the present invention;

15 FIG. 20 is a simplified block diagram of one aspect of the present invention employing one embodiment of a diffusion replica delay circuit;

20 FIG. 21 is a simplified block diagram of one aspect of the present invention employing another embodiment of a diffusion replica delay circuit;

FIG. 22A is a schematic diagram of another aspect of an embodiment of the present invention, employing a high-speed, low-power data transfer bus circuit; and

25 FIG. 22B is a schematic diagram of another aspect of an embodiment of the present invention, employing a high-speed, low-power data transfer bus circuit.

#### DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE EMBODIMENTS

30 As will be understood by one having skill in the art, most VLSI systems, including communications systems and DSP devices contain VLSI memory subsystems. Modern applications of VLSI memory subsystems almost invariably demand high efficiency, high performance implementations that magnify the design tradeoff between layout efficient, speed, power consumption, scalability, 35 design tolerances, and the like. The present invention

1 between layout efficient, speed, power consumption, scalability,  
design tolerances, and the like. The present invention  
ameliorates these tradeoffs using a novel hierarchical  
architecture. The memory module of the present invention also  
5 can employ one or more novel components which further add to the  
memory modules efficiency and robustness.

Hereafter, but solely for the purposes of exposition, it  
will be useful to describe the various aspects and embodiments  
of the invention herein in the context of an SRAM memory  
10 structure, using CMOS SRAM memory cells. However, it will be  
appreciated by those skilled in the art the present invention is  
not limited to CMOS-based processes and that, *mutatis mutandi*,  
these aspects and embodiments may be used in categories of memory  
products other than SRAM, including without limitation, DRAM,  
15 ROM, PLA, and the like, whether embedded within a VLSI system,  
or a stand alone memory device.

#### EXEMPLARY SRAM MODULE AND STORAGE CELL

Figure 1 is a functional block diagram of SRAM memory  
structure 100 that illustrates the basic features of most SRAM  
20 subsystems. Module 100 includes memory core 102, word line  
controller 104, precharge controller 112, memory address inputs  
114, and bitline controller 116. Memory core 102 is composed of  
a two-dimensional array of K-bits of memory cells 103, which is  
arranged to have C columns and R rows of bit storage locations,  
25 where  $K = [C \times R]$ . The most common configuration of memory core  
102 uses single word line 106 to connect cells 103 onto paired  
differential bitlines 118. In general, core 102 is arranged as  
an array of  $2^p$  word lines, based on a set of P memory address  
input lines 114 i.e.,  $R = 2^p$ . Thus, the p-bit address is decoded  
30 by row address decoder 110 and column address decoder 122.  
Access to a given memory cell 103 within such a single-core  
memory is accomplished by activating the column 105 and the row  
106 corresponding to cell 103. Column 105 is activated by  
selecting, and switching, all bitlines in the particular column  
35 corresponding to cell 103.



1       The particular row to be accessed is chosen by selective  
activation of row address decoder 110, which usually corresponds  
uniquely with a given row, or word line, spanning all cells 103  
on the particular row. Also, word driver 108 can drive selected  
5 word line 106 such that selected memory cell 103 can be written  
into or read out, on a particular pair of bitlines 118, according  
to the bit address supplied to memory address inputs 114.

Bitline controller 116 can include precharge cells 120,  
column multiplexers 122, sense amplifiers 124, and input/output  
10 buffers 126. Because differential read/write schemes are  
typically used for memory cells, it is desirable that bitlines  
be placed in a well-defined state before being accessed.  
Precharge cells 120 can be used to set up the state of bitlines  
118, through a PRECHARGE cycle, according to a predefined  
15 precharging scheme. In a static precharging scheme, precharge  
cells 120 can be left continuously on. While often simple to  
implement, static precharging can add a substantial power burden  
to active device operation. Dynamic precharging schemes can use  
clocked precharge cells 120 to charge the bitlines and, thus, can  
20 reduce the power budget of structure 100. In addition to  
establishing a defined state on bitlines 118, precharging cells  
120 can also be used to effect equalization of differential  
voltages on bitlines 118 prior to a read operation. Sense  
amplifiers 124 allow the size of memory cell 103 to be reduced  
25 by sensing the differential voltage on bitline 118, which is  
indicative of its state, and translating that differential  
voltage into a logic-level signal.

In general a READ operation is performed by enabling row  
decoder 110, which selects a particular row. The charge on one  
30 bitlines 118 from each pair of bitlines on each column will  
discharge through the enabled memory cell 103, representing the  
state of the active cells 103 on that column 105. Column decoder  
122 will enable only one of the columns, and will connect  
bitlines 118 to input/output buffer 126. Sense amplifiers 124  
35 provide the driving capability to source current to input/output

1 buffer 126. When sense amplifier 124 is enabled, the unbalanced bitlines 118 will cause the balanced sense amplifier to trip toward the state of the bitlines, and (data 125) will be output by buffer 126.

5 A WRITE operation is performed by applying data 125 to I/O buffers 126. Prior to the WRITE operation, bitlines 118 are precharged by precharge cells 120 to a predetermined value. The application of input data 125 to I/O buffers 126 tend to discharge the precharge voltage on one of the bitlines 118,  
 10 leaving one bitline logic HIGH and one bitline logic LOW. Column decoder 122 selects a particular column 105 connecting bitlines 118 to I/O buffers 126, thereby discharging one of the bitlines 118. The row decoder 110 selects a particular row, and the information on bitlines 118 will be written on cell 103 at the  
 15 intersection of column 105 and row 106. At the beginning of a typical internal timing cycle, precharging is disabled, and is not enabled again until the entire operation is completed. Column decoder 122 and row decoder 110 are then activated, followed by the activation of sense amplifier 124. At the  
 20 conclusion of a READ or a WRITE operation, sense amplifier 124 is deactivated. This is followed by disabling decoders 110, 122, at which time precharge cells 120 become active again during a subsequent PRECHARGE cycle. In general, keeping sense amplifier 124 activated during the entire READ/WRITE operation leads to  
 25 excessive device power consumption, because sense amplifier 124 needs to be active only for the actual time required to sense the state of memory cell 103.

Figure 2 illustrates one implementation of memory cell 103 in Figure 1, in the form of six-transistor CMOS cell 200. Transistor cell 200 is one type of transistor which also may be  
 30 used in embodiments of the present invention. SRAM cell 200 can be in one of three possible states: (1) the STABLE state, in which cell 200 holds a signal value corresponding to a logic "1" or logic "0"; (2) a READ operation state; or (3) a WRITE  
 35 operation state. In the STABLE state, memory cell 200 is

1 effectively disconnected from the memory core (e.g., core 102 in  
 FIG. 1). Bitlines 202, 204 are precharged HIGH (logic "1")  
 before any operation (READ or WRITE) can take place. Row select  
 transistors 206, 208 are turned off during precharge. Precharge  
 power is supplied by precharge cells (not shown) coupled with the  
 bitlines 202, 204, similar to precharge cells 120 in Figure 1.  
 A READ operation is initiated by performing a PRECHARGE cycle,  
 precharging bitlines 202, 204 to logic HIGH, and activating word  
 line 205 using row select transistors 206, 208. One of the  
 10 bitlines 202, 204 discharges through bit cell 200, and a  
 differential voltage is setup between the bitlines 202, 204.  
 This voltage is sensed and amplified to logic levels. A WRITE  
 operation to cell 200 is carried out after another PRECHARGE  
 cycle, by driving bitlines 202, 204 to the required state, and  
 15 activating word line 205. CMOS is a desirable technology because  
 the supply current drawn by such an SRAM cell typically is  
 limited to the leakage current of transistors 201a-d while in the  
 STABLE state.

As memory cell density increases, and as memory components  
 20 are further integrated into more complex systems, it becomes  
 imperative to provide memory architectures that are robust,  
 reliable, fast, and area- and power-efficient. Single-core  
 architectures, similar to those illustrated in FIG. 1, are  
 increasingly unable to satisfy the power, speed, area and  
 25 robustness constraints for a given high-performance memory  
 application. Therefore, it is desirable to minimize power  
 consumption, increase device speed, and improve device  
 reliability and robustness, and numerous approaches have been  
 developed to those ends. The advantages of the present invention  
 30 may be better appreciated within the following context of some  
 of these approaches, particularly as they relate to power  
 reduction and speed improvement, and to redundancy and  
 robustness.

# POWER REDUCTION AND SPEED IMPROVEMENT

In reference to FIG. 1, the content of memory cell 103 of memory block 100 is detected in sense amplifier 102, using a differential signal between bitlines 104, 106. However, this architecture is not scalable. Also, as memory block 100 is made larger, there are practical limitations to the ability of sense amplifier 102 to receive an adequate signal in a timely fashion at bitlines 104, 106. Increasing the length of bitlines 104, 106, increases the associated bitline capacitance and, thus, increases the time needed for a signal to develop on bitlines 104, 106. More power must be supplied to lines 104, 106 to overcome the additional capacitance. Also, under the architectures of the existing art, it takes more time to precharge longer bitlines, thereby reducing the effective device speed. Similarly, writing to longer bitlines 104, 106, as found in the existing art, requires more extensive precharging, thereby increasing the power demands of the circuit, and further reducing the effective device speed.

In general, reduced power consumption in memory devices such as structure 100 in FIG. 1 can be accomplished by, for example, reducing total switched capacitance, and minimizing voltage swings. The advantages of the power reduction aspects of certain embodiments of the present invention can further be appreciated within the context of switched capacitance reduction and voltage swing limitation.

## SWITCHED CAPACITANCE REDUCTION

As the bit density of memory structures increases, it has been observed that single-core memory structures can have unacceptably large switching capacitances associated with each memory access. Access to any bit location within such a single-core memory necessitates enabling the entire row, or word line, in which the datum is stored, and switching all bitlines in the structure. Therefore, it is desirable to design high-performance

1 memory structures to reduce the total switched capacitance during any given access.

Two well-known approaches for reducing total switched capacitance during a memory structure access include dividing a single-core memory structure into a banked memory structure, and employing divided word line structures. In the former approach, it is necessary to activate only the particular memory bank associated with the memory cell of interest. In the latter approach, total switched capacitance is reduced by localizing word line activation to the greatest practicable extent.

#### Divided or Banked Memory Core

One approach to reducing switching capacitances is to divide the memory core into separately switchable banks of memory cells. Typically, the total switched capacitance during a given memory access for banked memory cores is inversely proportional to the number of banks employed. By judiciously selecting the number and placement of bank units within a given memory core design, as well as the type of decoding used, the total switching capacitance, and thus the overall power consumed by the memory core, can be greatly reduced. A banked design also may realize a higher product yield, because the memory banks can be arranged such that a defective bank is rendered inoperable and inaccessible, while the remaining operational banks of the memory core can be packed into a lower-capacity product.

However, banked designs may not be appropriate for certain applications. Divided memory cores demand additional decoding circuitry to permit selective access to individual banks, and incur a delay as a result. Also, many banked designs employ memory segments that are merely scaled-down versions of traditional monolithic core memory designs, with each segment having dedicated control, precharging, decoding, sensing, and driving circuitry. These circuits tend to consume much more power in both standby and operational modes, than do their associated memory cells. Such banked structures may be simple

1 to design, but the additional complexity and power consumption  
thus can reduce overall memory component performance.

By their very nature, banked designs are not suitable for  
scaling-up to accommodate large design requirements. Also,  
5 traditional banked designs may not be readily conformable to  
applications requiring a memory core configuration that is  
substantially different from the underlying memory bank  
architecture (e.g., a memory structure needing relatively few  
rows of very long bit-length word lengths). Rather than resort  
10 to a top-down division of the basic memory structure using banked  
memory designs, preferred embodiments of the present invention  
provide a hierarchical memory structure that is synthesized using  
a bottom-up approach, by hierarchically coupling basic memory  
modules with localized decision-making features that  
15 synergistically cooperate to dramatically reduce the overall  
power needs, and improve the operating speed, of the structure.  
At a minimum, such a basic hierarchical module can include  
localized bitline sensing.

#### 20 Divided Word Line

Often, the bit-width of a memory component is sized to  
accommodate a particular word length. As the word length for a  
particular design increases, so do the associated word line  
delays, switched capacitance, power consumption, and the like.  
25 To accommodate very long word lines, it may be desirable to  
divide core-spanning global word lines into local word lines,  
each consisting of smaller groups of adjacent, word-oriented  
memory cells. Each local group employs local decoding and  
driving components to produce the local word line signals when  
30 the global word line, to which it is coupled, is activated. In  
long word length applications, the additional overhead incurred  
by divided word lines can be offset by reduced word line delays,  
power consumption and so forth. However, the added overhead  
imposed by existing divided word line schemes may make it  
35 unsuitable for many implementations. As before, rather than

1 resorting to the traditional top-down division of word lines,  
certain preferred embodiment of the invention herein include  
providing a local word line to the aforementioned basic memory  
module, which further enhances the local decision making features  
5 of the module. As before, by using a bottom-up approach to  
hierarchically couple basic memory modules, here with the added  
localized decision-making features of local word lines according  
to the present invention, additional synergies are realized,  
which further reduce overall power consumption and signal  
10 propagation times.

#### VOLTAGE-SWING REDUCTION TECHNIQUES

Power reduction also can be achieved by reducing the voltage  
swings experienced throughout the structure. By limiting voltage  
15 swings, it is possible to reduce the amount of power dissipated  
as the voltage at a node or on a line decays during a particular  
event or operation, as well as to reduce the amount of power  
required to return the various decayed voltages to the desired  
state after the particular event or operation, or prior to the  
20 next access. Two techniques to this end include using pulsed  
word lines and sense amplifier voltage swing reduction.

#### Pulsed Word Lines

By enabling a word line just long enough to correctly detect  
25 the differential voltage across a selected memory cell, it is  
possible to reduce the bitline voltage discharge corresponding  
to a READ operation on the selected cell. In some designs, by  
applying a pulsed signal to the associated word line over a  
chosen interval, a sense amplifier is activated only during that  
30 interval, thereby reducing the duration of the bitline voltage  
decay. These designs typically use some form of pulse generator  
that produces a fixed-duration pulse. If the duration of the  
pulse is targeted to satisfy worst-case timing scenarios, the  
additional margin will result in unnecessary bitline current draw  
35 during nominal operations. Therefore, it is desirable to employ

1 a self-timed, self-limiting word line device that is responsive  
to the actual duration of a given READ operation on a selected  
cell, and that substantially limits word line activation to that  
duration. Furthermore, where a sense amplifier can successfully  
5 complete a READ operation in less than a memory system clock  
cycle, it also may be desirable that the pulse width activation  
be asynchronous, relative to the memory system clock. Certain  
aspects of the present invention provide a pulsed word line  
signal, for example, using a cooperative interaction between  
10 global and local word line decoders.

#### Sense Amplifier Voltage Swing Reduction

15 In order to make large memory arrays, it is most desirable  
to keep the size of an individual memory cell to a minimum. As  
a result, individual memory cells generally are incapable of  
supplying driving current to associated input/output bitlines.  
Sense amplifiers typically are used to detect the value of the  
datum stored in a particular memory cell and to provide the  
current needed to drive the I/O lines. In sense amplifier  
20 design, there typically is a trade-off between power and speed,  
with faster response times usually dictating greater power  
requirements. Faster sense amplifiers can also tend to be  
physically larger, relative to low speed, low power devices.  
Furthermore, the analog nature of sense amplifiers can result in  
25 their consuming an appreciable fraction of the total power.  
Although one way to improve the responsiveness of a sense  
amplifier is to use a more sensitive sense amplifier, any gained  
benefits are offset by the concomitant circuit complexity which  
nevertheless suffers from increased noise sensitivity. It is  
30 desirable, then, to limit bitline voltage swings and to reduce  
the power consumed by the sense amplifier.

In one typical design, the sense amplifier detects the small  
differential signals across a memory cell, which are in an  
unbalanced state representative of datum value stored in the  
35 cell, and amplifies the resulting signal to logic level. Prior



1 to a READ operation, the bitlines associated with a particular  
memory column are precharged to a chosen value. When a specific  
memory cell is enabled, a row decoder selects the particular row  
in which the memory cell is located, and an associated column  
5 decoder selects a sense amplifier associated with the particular  
column. The charge on one of those bitlines is discharged through  
the enabled memory cell, in a manner corresponding to the value  
of the datum stored in the memory cell. This produces an  
imbalance between the signals on the paired bitlines, and causing  
10 a bitline voltage swing. When enabled, the sense amplifier  
detects the unbalanced signal and, in response, the usually-  
balanced sense amplifier state changes to a state representative  
of the value of the datum. This state detection and response  
occurs within a finite period, during which a specific amount of  
15 power is dissipated. The longer it takes to detect the  
unbalanced signal, the greater the voltage decay on the  
precharged bitlines, and the more power dissipated during the  
READ operation. Any power that is dissipated beyond the actual  
time necessary for sensing the memory cell state, is truly wasted  
20 power. In traditional SRAM designs, the sense amplifiers that  
operate during a particular READ operation, remain active during  
nearly the entire read cycle. However, this approach  
unnecessarily dissipates substantial amounts of power,  
considering that a sense amplifier needs to be active just long  
25 enough to correctly detect the differential voltage across a  
selected memory cell, indicating the stored memory state.

There are two general approaches to reducing power in sense  
amplifiers. First, sense amplifier current can be limited by  
using sense amplifiers that automatically shut off once the sense  
30 operation has completed. One sense amplifier design to this end  
is a self-latching sense amplifier, which turns off as soon as  
the sense amplifier indicates the sensed datum state. Second,  
sense amplifier currents can be limited by constraining the  
activation of the sense amplifier to precisely the period  
35 required. This approach can be realized through the use of a

1 dummy column circuit, complete with bit cells, sense amplifier,  
and support circuitry. By mimicking the operation of a  
functional column, the dummy circuit can provide to a sense  
amplifier timing circuit an approximation of the activation  
5 period characteristic of the functional sense amplifiers in the  
memory system. Although the dummy circuit approximation can be  
quite satisfactory, there is an underlying assumption that all  
functional sense amplifiers have completed the sensing operation  
by the time the dummy circuit completes the its operation. In  
10 that regard, use of a dummy circuit can be similar to enabling  
the sense amplifiers with a fixed-duration pulsed signal.  
Aspects of the present invention provide circuitry and sense  
amplifiers which limit voltage swings, and which improve the  
sensitivity and robustness of sense amplifier operation. For  
15 example, compact, power-conserving sense amplifiers having  
increased immunity to noise, as well as to intrinsic and  
operational offsets, are provided. In the context of the present  
invention, such sense amplifiers can be realized at the local  
module tier, as well as throughout the higher tiers of a  
20 hierarchical memory structure, according to the present  
invention.

#### REDUNDANCY

Memory designers typically balance power and device area  
25 against speed. High-performance memory components place a severe  
strain on the power and area budgets of associated systems  
particularly where such components are embedded within a VLSI  
system, such as a digital signal processing system. Therefore,  
it is highly desirable to provide memory subsystems that are  
30 fast, yet power-and area-efficient. Highly integrated, high  
performance components require complex fabrication and  
manufacturing processes. These processes experience unavoidable  
parameter variations which can impose physical defects upon the  
units being produced, or can exploit design vulnerabilities to

1 the extent of rendering the affected units unusable, or  
substandard.

5 In a memory structure, redundancy can be important, for  
example, because a fabrication flaw, or operational failure, of  
even a single bit cell may result in the failure of the system  
relying upon the memory. Likewise, process invariant features  
may be needed to insure that the internal operations of the  
structure conform to precise timing and parametric  
10 specifications. Lacking redundancy and process invariant  
features, the actual manufacturing yield for a particular memory  
structure can be unacceptably low. Low-yield memory structures  
are particularly unacceptable when embedded within more complex  
systems, which inherently have more fabrication and manufacturing  
vulnerabilities. A higher manufacturing yield translates into  
15 a lower per-unit cost and robust design translates into reliable  
products having lower operational costs. Thus, it is also highly  
desirable to design components having redundancy and process  
invariant features wherever possible.

20 Redundancy devices and techniques constitute other certain  
preferred aspects of the invention herein which, alone or  
together, enhance the functionality of the hierarchical memory  
structure. The aforementioned redundancy aspects of the present  
invention can render the hierarchical memory structure less  
susceptible to incapacitation by defects during fabrication or  
25 during operation, advantageously providing a memory product that  
is at once more manufacturable and cost-efficient, and  
operationally more robust. Redundancy within a hierarchical  
memory module can be realized by adding one or more redundant  
rows, columns, or both, to the basic module structure. In one  
30 aspect of the present invention a decoder enabling row redundancy  
is provided. Moreover, a memory structure composed of  
hierarchical memory modules can employ one or more redundant  
modules for mapping to failed memory circuits. A redundant  
module can provide a one-for-one replacement of a failed module,

35

1 or it can provide one or more memory cell circuits to one or more primary memory modules.

#### MEMORY MODULE WITH HIERARCHICAL FUNCTIONALITY

5 The modular, hierarchical memory architecture according to the invention herein provides a compact, robust, power-efficient, high-performance memory system having, advantageously, a flexible and extensively scalable architecture. The hierarchical memory structure is composed of fundamental memory  
10 modules which can be cooperatively coupled, and arranged in multiple hierarchical tiers, to devise a composite memory product having arbitrary column depth or row length. This bottom-up modular approach localizes timing considerations, decision making, and power consumption to the particular unit(s) in which  
15 the desired data is stored.

Within a defined design hierarchy, the fundamental memory modules can be grouped to form a larger memory block, that itself can be coupled with similar memory structures to form still larger memory blocks. In turn, these larger structures can be  
20 arranged to create a complex structure at the highest tier of the hierarchy. In hierarchical sensing, it is desired to provide two or more tiers of bit sensing, thereby decreasing the read and write time of the device, i.e., increasing effective device speed, while reducing overall device power requirements. In a  
25 hierarchical design, switching and memory cell power consumption during a read/write operation are localized to the immediate vicinity of the memory cells being evaluated or written, i.e., those memory cells in selected memory modules, with the exception of a limited number of global word line selectors and sense  
30 amplifiers, and support circuitry. The majority of modules that do not contain the memory cells being evaluated or written generally remain inactive.

Preferred embodiments of the present invention provide a hierarchical memory module using local bitline sensing, local  
35 word line decoding, or both, which intrinsically reduces overall

1 power consumption and signal propagation, and increases overall  
speed, as well as design flexibility and scalability. Aspects  
of the present invention contemplate apparatus and methods which  
further limit the overall power dissipation of the hierarchical  
5 memory structure, while minimizing the impact of a multi-tier  
hierarchy. Certain aspects of the present invention are directed  
to mitigate functional vulnerabilities that may develop from  
variations in operational parameters, or that related to the  
fabrication process. In addition, devices and techniques are  
10 disclosed which advantageously ameliorate system performance  
degradation resulting from temporal inefficiencies, including,  
without limitation, a high-precision delay measurement circuit,  
a diffusion delay replication circuit and associated dummy  
devices. In another aspect of the present invention, an  
15 asynchronously resettable decoder is provided that reduces the  
bitline voltage discharge, corresponding, for example, to a READ  
operation on the selected cell, by limiting word-line activation  
to the actual time required for the sense amplifier to correctly  
detect the differential voltage across a selected memory cell.

#### 20 HIERARCHICAL MEMORY MODULES

In prior art memory designs, such as the aforementioned  
banked designs, large logical memory blocks are divided into  
smaller, physical modules, each having the attendant overhead of  
25 an entire block of memory including predecoders, sense  
amplifiers, multiplexers, and the like. In the aggregate, such  
memory blocks would behave as an individual memory block.  
However, using the present invention, memory blocks of  
comparable, or much larger, size can be provided by coupling  
30 hierarchical functional modules into larger physical memory  
blocks of arbitrary number of words and word length. For  
example, existing designs which aggregate smaller memory blocks  
into a single logical block usually require the replication of  
the predecoders, sense amplifiers, and other overhead circuitry  
35 that would be associated with a single memory block. According

1 to the present invention, this replication is unnecessary, and  
undesirable. One embodiment of the invention comprehends local  
bitline sensing, in which a limited number of memory cells are  
coupled with a single local sense amplifier, thereby forming a  
5 basic memory module. Similar memory modules are grouped and  
arranged to output the local sense amplifier signal to the global  
sense amplifier signal. Thus, the bitlines associated with the  
memory cells are not directly coupled with a global sense  
amplifier, mitigating the signal propagation delay and power  
10 consumption typically associated with global bitline sensing.  
In this approach, the local bitline sense amplifier quickly and  
economically sense the state of a selected memory cell and report  
the state to the global sense amplifier. In another embodiment  
of the invention herein, the delays and power consumption of  
15 global word line decoding are mitigated by providing a memory  
module, composed of a limited number of memory cells, having  
local word line decoding. Similar to the local bitline sensing  
approach, a single global word line decoder can be coupled with  
the respective local word line decoders of multiple modules.  
20 When the global decoder is activated with an address, only the  
local word line decoder associated with the desired memory cell  
responds, and activates the memory cell. This aspect, too, is  
particularly power-conservative and fast, because the loading on  
the global line is limited to the associated local word line  
25 decoders, and the global word line signal need be present only  
as long as required to trigger the relevant local word line. In  
yet another embodiment of the present invention, a hierarchical  
memory module employing both local bitline sensing and local word  
line decoding is provided, which realizes the advantages of both  
30 approaches. Each of the above embodiments are discussed  
forthwith.

#### Local Bitline Sensing

FIG. 3 illustrates a memory block 300 formed by coupling  
35 multiple cooperating constituent modules 320a-e, with each of the

1 modules 320a-e having a respective local sense amplifier 308a-e.  
Each module is composed of a predefined number of memory cells  
325a-g, which are coupled with one of the respective local sense  
amplifiers 308a-e. Each local sense amplifiers 308a-e is coupled  
5 with global sense amplifier 302 via bitlines 304, 306. Because  
each of local sense amplifiers 308a-e sense only the local  
bitlines 310a-e, 312a-e, of the respective memory modules 320a-e,  
the amount of time and power necessary to precharge local  
bitlines 310a-e and 312a-e are substantially reduced. Only when  
10 local sense amplifier 308a-e senses a signal on respective local  
lines 310a-e and 312a-e, does it provide a signal to global sense  
amplifier 302. This architecture adds flexibility and  
scalability to a memory architecture design because the memory  
size can be increased by adding locally-sensed memory modules  
15 such as 320a-e.

Increasing the number of local sense amplifiers 308a-e  
attached to global bitlines 304, 306, does not significantly  
increase the loading upon the global bitlines, or increase the  
power consumption in global bitlines 304, 306 because signal  
20 development and precharging occur only in the local sense  
amplifier 308a-e, proximate to the signal found in the memory  
cells 325a-g within corresponding memory module 320a-e.

In preferred embodiments of the invention herein, it is  
desirable to have each module be self-timed. That is, each  
25 memory module 320a-e can have internal circuitry that senses and  
establishes a sufficient period for local sensing to occur. Such  
self-timing circuitry is well-known in the art. In single-core  
designs, or even banked designs, self-timing memory cores may be  
unsuitable for high-performance operation, because the timing  
30 tends to be dependent upon the slowest of many components in the  
structure, and because the signal propagation times in such large  
structures can be significant. The implementation of self-timing  
in these larger structures can be adversely affected by  
variations in fabrication and manufacturing processes, which can

1 substantially impact the operational parameters of the memory array and the underlying timing circuit components.

In a hierarchical memory module, self-timing is desirable because the timing paths for each module 320a-e comprehends only a limited number of memory cells 325a-g over a very limited signal path. Each module, in effect, has substantial autonomy in deciding the amount of time required to execute a given PRECHARGE, READ, or WRITE operation. For the most part, the duration of an operation is very brief at the local tier, relative to the access time of the overall structure, so that memory structure 300 composed of hierarchical memory modules 320a-e is not subject to the usual difficulties associated with self-timing, and also is resistant to fabrication and manufacturing process variations.

In general, the cores of localized sense amplifiers 308a-e can be smaller than a typical global sense amplifier 302, because a relatively larger signal develops within a given period on the local sense amplifier bitlines, 310a-e, 312a-e. That is, there is more signal available to drive local sense amplifier 308a-e. In a global-sense-amplifier-only architecture, a greater delay occurs while a signal is developed across the global bitlines, which delay can be decreased at the expense of increased power consumption. Advantageously, local bit sensing implementations can reduce the delay while simultaneously reducing consumed power.

In certain aspects of the invention herein, detailed below, a limited swing driver signal can be sent from the active local sense amplifier to the global sense amplifier. A full swing signal also may be sent, in which case, a very simple digital buffer, may be used. However, if a limited swing signal is used, a more complicated sense amplifier may be needed. For a power constrained application, it may be desirable to share local sense amplifiers among two or more memory modules. Sense amplifier sharing, however, may slightly retard the bit signal development line indirectly because, during the first part of a sensing



1 period, the capacitances of each of the top and the bottom shared  
memory modules are being discharged. However, this speed  
decrease can be minimized and is relatively small, when compared  
to the benefits gained by employing logical sense amplifiers over  
5 the existing global-only architectures. Moreover, preferred  
embodiments of the invention herein can obviate these potentially  
adverse effects of sense amplifier sharing by substantially  
isolating the local sense amplifier from associated local  
bitlines which are not coupled with the memory cell to be sensed.

10 FIG. 4 shows a memory structure 400, which is similar to  
structure 300 in FIG. 3, by providing local bitline sensing of  
modules 420a-d. Each memory module 420a-d is composed of a  
predefined number of memory cells 425a-g. Memory cells 425a-g  
are coupled with respective local sense amplifier 408a, b via  
15 local bitlines 410a-d, 412a-d. Unlike structure 300 in FIG. 3,  
where each module 320a-e has its own local sense amplifier 308a-  
e, memory modules 420a-d are paired with a single sense amplifier  
408a, b. Similar to FIG. 3, FIG. 4 shows global sense amplifier  
402 being coupled with local sense amplifiers 408a, 408b.

20 FIG. 5 further illustrates that memory structures such as  
module 300 in FIG. 3 can be coupled such that the overall  
structure is extended in address size (this is vertically), or  
in bit length (this is horizontally), or both. The arrayed  
structure in FIG. 5 also can use modules such as module 400 in  
25 FIG. 4. FIG. 5 also illustrates that a composite memory  
structure 500 using hierarchical memory modules can be truly  
hierarchical. Memory blocks 502, 503 can be composed of multiple  
memory modules, such as module 504, which can be modules as  
described in reference to FIG. 3 and FIG. 4. Each memory block  
30 502, 503 employs two-tier sensing, as previously illustrated.  
However, in structure 500, memory blocks 502, 503 employ an  
intermediate tier of bitline sensing, using, for example, midtier  
sense amplifiers 514, 516. Under the hierarchical memory  
paradigm, midtier sense amplifiers 514, 516 can be coupled with  
35 global sense amplifier 520. Indeed, the hierarchical memory

1 paradigm, in accordance with the present invention, can  
comprehend a highly-scalable multi-tiered hierarchy, enabling the  
memory designer to devise memory structures having memory cell  
densities and configurations that are tailored to the  
5 application. Advantageously, this scalability and  
configurability can be obtained without the attendant delays, and  
substantially increased power and area consumption of prior art  
memory architectures.

10 One of the key factors in designing a faster, power-  
efficient device is that the capacitance per unit length of the  
global bitline can be made less than the capacitance of the local  
bitlines. This is because, using the hierarchical scheme, the  
capacitance of the global bitline is no longer constrained by the  
cell design. For example, metal lines can be run on top of the  
15 memory device. Also, a multiplexing scheme can be used that  
increase the pitch of the bitlines, thereby dispersing them,  
further reducing bitline capacitance. Overall, the distance  
between the global bitlines can be wider, because the memory  
cells are not directly connected to the global bitlines.  
20 Instead, each cell, e.g. cell 303 in Fig 3., is connected only  
to the local sense amplifier, e.g. sense amplifier 308a-e.

#### Local Word Line Decoding

25 FIG. 6 illustrates a hierarchical structure 600 having  
hierarchical word-line decoding in which each hierarchical memory  
module 605 is composed of a predefined number of memory cells  
610, which are coupled with a particular local word line decoder  
615a-c. Each local word line decoder 615a-c is coupled with a  
30 respective global word line decoder 620. Each global word line  
decoder 620a-d is activated when predecoder 622 transmits address  
information relevant to a particular global word line decoder  
620a-d via predecoder lines 623. In response, global word line  
decoder 620a-d activates global word line 630 which, in turn,  
35 activates a particular local word line decoder 615a-c. Local word  
line decoder 615a-c then enables associated memory module 605,

1 so that the particular memory cell 610 of interest can be  
evaluated. Each of memory modules 605 can be considered to be  
an independent memory component to the extent that the  
hierarchical functionality of each of modules 605 relies upon  
5 local sensing via local sense amplifiers 608a-b, local decoding  
via local word line decoders 615a-c, or both. As with other  
preferred embodiments of the invention herein, it is desirable  
to have each module 605 be self-timed. Self-timing can be  
especially useful when used in conjunction with local word line  
10 decoding because a local timing signal from a respective one of  
memory module 605 can be used to terminate global word line  
activation, local bitline sensing, or both.

Similar to the scaling illustrated in FIG. 5, multiple  
memory devices 600 can be arrayed coupled with global bitlines  
15 or global decoding word lines, to create a composite memory  
component of a desired size and configuration. In an embodiment  
of the present invention, 256 rows of memory are used in each  
module 605, allowing the memory designer to create a memory block  
of arbitrary size, having a 256 row granularity. For prior art  
20 memory devices, a typical realistic limitation to the number of  
bits sense per sense amplifier is about 512 bit. Long bit or  
word lines can present a problem, particularly for a WRITE  
operations, because the associated driver can be limited by the  
amount of power it can produce, and the speed at which sufficient  
25 charge can be built-up upon signal lines, such as global bitlines  
604, 606 in FIG. 6.

Although FIG. 6 shows hierarchical word line decoding used  
in conjunction with hierarchical bitline operations, hierarchical  
word-line decoding can be implemented without hierarchical  
30 bitline sensing. It is preferred to use both the hierarchical  
word line decoding, and the hierarchical bitline sensing to  
obtain the synergistic effects of decreased power and increased  
speed for the entire device.

### 35 Hierarchical Functionality

1 In typical designs, power intends to increase approximately  
linearly with the size of the memory. However, according to the  
present invention, as illustrated in FIG. 3 through FIG. 6, power  
requirements may increase only fractionally as the overall memory  
5 structure size increases, primarily because only the memory  
module, and associated local bitlines and local word lines are  
activated during a given operation. Due to the localized  
functionality, the global bitlines and word lines are activated  
for relatively brief periods at the beginning and end of the  
10 operation. In any event, power consumption is generally dictated  
by the bit size of the word, and the basic module configuration,  
i.e., the number of rows and row length of modules 620a-e. Thus,  
significant benefits can be realized by judiciously selecting the  
configuration of a memory module, relative to the overall memory  
15 structure configuration. For example, in a memory structure  
according to the present invention, a doubling in the size of the  
memory device can account for power consumption increase of about  
twenty percent, and not a doubling, as found in prior art  
designs. Furthermore, a memory structure according to the present  
20 invention can realize a four-to-six-fold decrease in power  
requirements and can operate 30% to 50% faster, and often more,  
than traditional architectures.

FIG. 7 illustrates that memory structures according to the  
present invention, for example memory structure 740, are fully  
25 hierarchical, in that each tier within the hierarchy includes  
local bit line sensing, local word line decoding, or both.  
Exemplary memory structure 740 is three-tier hierarchical device  
with memory module 700 being representative of the fundamental,  
or lowest, (tier ( $L_0$ )) of the memory hierarchy; memory device 720  
30 being representative of the (intermediate tier ( $L_1$ )) of the memory  
hierarchy; and memory structure 740 being representative of the  
(upper tier ( $L_2$ )) of the memory hierarchy. For the sake of  
simplicity, only one memory column is shown at each tier, such  
that memory column 702 is intended to be representative of

1 fundamental tier ( $L_0$ ), memory column 722 of intermediate tier ( $L_1$ ), and memory column 742 of upper tier ( $L_2$ ).

(Tier  $L_0$ ) memory devices, such as memory module 700, are composed of multiple memory cells, generally indicated by memory  
 5 cell 701, which can be disposed in row, column, or 2-D array (row and column) formats. Memory module 700 is preferred to employ local bit line sensing, local word line decoding, or both, as was described relative to FIGS. 3 through 6. In the present example, module M00 includes both local bit line sensing and local word  
 10 line decoding. Each memory cell M01 in a respective column of memory cells 702 is coupled with local sense amplifier 703 by local bit lines 704a, 704b. Although local bit line sensing can be performed on a memory column having a single memory cell, it is preferred that two, or more, memory cells 701 be coupled with  
 15 local sense amplifier 703. Unlike some prior art memory devices which dispense with local bit line sensing by employing special memory cells which provide strong signals at full logic levels, module 700 can use, and indeed is preferred to use, conventional and low-power memory cells 701 as constituent memory cells. An  
 20 advantage of local bit line sensing is that only a limited voltage swing on bit lines 704a, 704b may be needed by local sense amplifier 703 to accurately sense the state of memory cell 701, which permits rapid memory state detection and reporting using substantially less power than with prior art designs.

25 (Tier  $L_0$ ) local sense amplifier 703 detects the memory state of memory cell 701 by coupling the memory state signal to (tier  $L_0$ ) local sense amplifier 703, via local bit lines 704a, 704b. It is preferred that the memory state signal be a limited swing voltage signal. Amplifier 703 transmits a sensed signal  
 30 representative of the memory state of memory cell 701 to (tier  $L_1$ ) sense amplifier 723 via (tier  $L_0$ ) local sense amplifier outputs 705a, 705b, which are coupled with intermediate tier bit lines 724a, 724b. It is preferred that the sensed signal be a limited swing voltage signal, as well. In turn, amplifier 723 transmits  
 35 a second sensed signal representative of the memory state of

1 memory cell 701 to (tier  $L_2$ ) sense amplifier 743, via tier  $L_1$  local  
sense amplifier outputs 725a, 725b, which are coupled with upper  
tier bit lines 744a, 744b. It also is preferred that the second  
sensed signal be a limited voltage swing signal.

5 Where (tier  $L_2$ ) is the uppermost tier of the memory hierarchy,  
as is illustrated in the instant example, sense amplifier 743 can  
be a global sense amplifier, which propagates a third signal  
representative of memory cell 701 to associated I/O circuitry  
(not shown) via sense amplifier output lines 746a, 746b. Such I/O  
10 circuitry can be similar to I/O in FIG. 1. However, the present  
invention contemplates a hierarchical structure that can consist  
of two, three, four, or more, tiers of hierarchy. The uppermost  
tier signal can be a full-swing signal. In view of FIG. 7, a  
skilled artisan would realize that "local bit line sensing"  
15 occurs at each (tier  $L_0$ ,  $L_1$ , and  $L_2$ ) in the exemplary hierarchy,  
and is desirable, for example, because only a limited voltage  
swing may be needed to report the requested memory state from a  
lower tier in the hierarchy to the next higher tier.

20 Hierarchical memory structures also can employ local word  
line decoding, as illustrated in memory device 740. In FIG. 7,  
memory device 740 is (the uppermost tier ( $L_2$ )) in the hierarchical  
memory structure, thus incoming global word line signal 746 is  
received from global word line drivers (not shown) such as global  
row address decoders 110 in FIG. 1. In certain preferred  
25 embodiments of the present invention, predecoding is employed to  
effect rapid access to desired word lines, although predecoding  
is not required, and may not be desired, at every tier in a  
particular implementation. (Signal M46) is received by upper tier  
predecoder 747, predecoded and supplied to (upper tier ( $L_2$ )) global  
30 word line decoders, such as global word line decoder 748.  
(Decoder M48) is coupled with local word line decoder 749 by way  
of upper tier global word line 750, and selectively activates  
upper tier local word line decoder 749. (Activated  $L_2$  local  
decoder M49) in turn, (activates  $L_2$ ) local word line 751, which  
35 propagates selected word line signal 726 to (intermediate tier

1 (L<sub>1</sub>) predecoder 727. Predecoder 727 decodes and activates the  
 appropriate (intermediate tier (L<sub>1</sub>)) global word line decoder, such  
 as global word line decoder 728. Decoder 728 is coupled with,  
 and selectively activates, (tier L<sub>1</sub>) local word line decoder 729 by  
 way of (tier (L<sub>1</sub>)) global word line 730. Activated L<sub>1</sub> local  
 decoder 729, in turn, propagates a selected word line signal 706  
 to (fundamental tier (L<sub>0</sub>)) predecoder 707, which decodes and  
 activates the appropriate (tier L<sub>0</sub>) global word line decoder, such  
 as global word line decoder 708. Activated L<sub>0</sub> local decoder 709,  
 10 in turn, (activates L<sub>0</sub>) local word line 711, and selects memory  
 cell 701 for access. In view of the foregoing discussion of  
 hierarchical word line decoding, a skilled artisan would realize  
 that "local word line decoding" occurs at each tier L<sub>0</sub>, L<sub>1</sub>, and  
 L<sub>2</sub> in the exemplary hierarchy, and is desirable because a  
 15 substantial reduction in the time and power needed to access  
 selected memory cells can be realized.

Although local word line decoding within module 700 is  
 shown in the context of a single column of memory cells, such as  
 memory columns 702, 722, 742, the present invention contemplates  
 20 that local word line decoding be performed across two, or more,  
 columns in each of hierarchy tiers, with each of the rows in the  
 respective columns employing two or more local word line  
 decoders, such as local word line decoders 709, 729, 749 which  
 are coupled with respective global word line decoders, such as  
 25 global word line decoders 708, 728, 748 by way of respective  
 global word lines, such as global word lines 710, 730, 750.  
 However, there is no requirement that equal numbers of rows and  
 columns be employed at any two tiers of the hierarchical  
 structure. In general, memory device 720 can be composed of  
 30 multiple memory modules 700, which fundamental modules 700 can  
 be disposed in row, column, or 2-D array (row and column) array  
 formats. Such fundamental memory modules can be similar to those  
 illustrated with respect to FIG. 3 through FIG. 6, and  
 combinations thereof. Likewise, memory device 740 can be  
 35 composed of multiple memory devices 720, which intermediate

1 devices 720 also can be disposed in row, column, or 2-D array  
 (row and column) formats. This extended, and extendable,  
 hierarchality permits the formation of multidimensional memory  
 modules that are distinct from prior art hierarchy-like  
 5 implementations, which generally are 2-D groupings of banked,  
 paged, or segmented memory devices, or register file memory  
 devices, lacking local functionality at each tier in the  
 hierarchy.

#### 10 Fast Decoder with Asynchronous Reset

Typically, local decoder reset can be used to generate  
 narrow pulse widths on word lines in a fast memory device. The  
 input signals to the word line decoder are generally synchronized  
 to a clock, or chip select, signal. However, it is desirable  
 15 that the word line be reset independently of the clock and also  
 of the varying of the input signals to the word line decoder.

FIG. 8 is a circuit diagram illustrative of an  
 asynchronously-resettable decoder 800 according to this aspect  
 of the present invention. It may be desirable to implement the  
 20 AND function, for example, by source-coupled logic. The  
 capacitance on the input  $x2_n$  802 can be generally large,  
 therefore the AND function is performed with about one inverter  
 delay plus three buffer stages. The buffers are skewed, which  
 decreases the load capacitance by about one-half and decreases  
 25 the buffer delay.

In order to be able to independently reset word line WL 804,  
 it is desirable that inputs 802, 803 be isolated from output 804,  
 and the node 805 should be charged to  $V_{dd}$ , turning off the large  
 PMOS driver M8 807 once word line WL 804 is set to logical HIGH.  
 30 Charging of node 805 to  $(V_{dd})$  can be accomplished by a feedback-  
 resetting loop. Inputs 802, 803 can be isolated from output 804  
 setting NMOS device 808 to logic LOW. When output WL 804 goes  
 high, monitor node 810 is discharged to ground, and device M0 812  
 is shut-off, thus isolating inputs 802, 803 from output WL 804.  
 35 The feedback loop precharges the rest of the nodes in the buffers



1 via monitor node 810, and PMOSFET M13 815 is turned on,  
 connecting the input x2\_n 802 to node 810. Decoder 800 will not  
 fire again until x2\_n 802 is reset to ( $V_{dd}$ ) which usually happens  
 when the system clock signal changes to logic LOW. Once x2\_n 802  
 5 is logic HIGH, node 810 charges to ( $V_{dd}$ ) with the assistance of  
 PMOS device M14 818, and device M0 812 is turned on. This turns  
 off PMOS device M13 815, thus isolating input x2\_n 802 from the  
 reset loop which employs node 810. Decoder 800 is now ready for  
 the next input cycle.

#### 10 Limited Swing Driver Circuit

FIG. 9 illustrates limited swing driver circuit 900  
 according to an aspect of the invention herein. In long word  
 length memories, a considerable amount of power may be consumed  
 15 in the data buses. Limiting the voltage swing in such buses can  
 decrease the overall power dissipation of the system. This also  
 can be true for a system where a significant amount of power is  
 dissipated in switching lines with high capacitance. Limited-  
 swing driver circuit 900 can reduce power dissipation, for  
 20 example, in high capacitance lines. When IN signal 902 is logic  
 HIGH, NMOS transistor MN1 904 conducts, and node 905 is  
 effectively pulled to ground. In addition, bitline 910 is  
 discharged through PMOSFET MP1 912. By appropriate device  
 sizing, the voltage swing on bitline 910 can be limited to a  
 25 desired value, when the inverter, formed by CMOSFETS MP2 914 and  
 MN2 916, switches OFF PMOSFET MP1 912. In general, the size of  
 circuit 900 is related to the capacitance ( $C_{bitline}$ ) 918 being  
 driven, and the sizes of MP2 914 and MN2 916. In another  
 embodiment of this aspect of the present invention, limited swing  
 30 driver circuit includes a tri-state output enable, and a self-  
 resetting feature. Tri-state functionality is desirable when  
 data lines are multiplexed or shared. Although the voltage at  
 memory cell node 905 can swing to approximately zero volts, it  
 is most desirable that the bitline voltage swing only by about  
 35 200-300 mV.

1 Single-Ended Sense Amplifier with Sample-and-Hold Reference

In general, single-ended sense amplifiers are useful to save metal space, however, existing designs tend not to be robust due to their susceptibility to power supply and ground noise. In yet another aspect of the present invention, FIG. 10 illustrates a single-ended sense amplifier 1000, preferably with a sample-and-hold reference. Amplifier 1000 can be useful, for example, as a global sense amplifier, sensing input data. At the beginning of an operation, DataIn 1004 is sampled, preferably just before the measurement begins. Therefore, supply, ground, or other noise will affect the reference voltage of sense amplifier 1000 generally in the same way noise affects node to be measured, tending to increase the noise immunity of the sense amplifier 1000. (Both inputs 1010, 1011 of differential amplifier 1012) are at the voltage level of DataIn 1004 when the activate signal (GWSELH) 1014 is logic LOW (i.e., at zero potential). At a preselected interval before the measurement begins, but before (DataIn 1013) begins to change, activate signal (GWSELH) 1014 is asserted to logic HIGH, thereby isolating the input node 1002 of the (transistor M162) 1008. The DataIn voltage existing just before the measurement is taken is sampled and held as a reference, thereby making the circuit substantially independent of ground or supply voltage references. Transistors (M190) 1025 and (M187) 1026 can add capacitance to the node 1021 where the reference voltage is stored. Transistor (M190) 1025 also can be used as a pump capacitance to compensate for the voltage decrease at the reference node 1021 when the activate signal becomes HIGH and pulls the source 1002 of (M162) 1008 to a lower voltage. Feedback 1030 from output data Data\_toLSA 1035, being transmitted to a local sense amplifier (not shown), is coupled with the source/drain of transistor (M187) 1026, actively adjusting the reference voltage at node 1021 by capacitive coupling, thereby adjusting the amplifier gain adaptively.

1. Sense Amplifier with Offset Cancellation and Charge-share Limited Swing Drivers

In yet another aspect of the present invention, a latch-type sense amplifier 1100 with dynamic offset cancellation is provided. Sense amplifier 1100 also may be useful as a global sense amplifier, and is suited for use in conjunction with hierarchical bitline sensing. Typically, the sensitivity of differential sense amplifiers can be limited by the offsets caused by inherent process variations for devices ("device matching"), and dynamic offsets that may develop on the input lines during high-speed operation. Decreasing the amplifier offset usually results in a corresponding decrease in the minimum bitline swing required for reliable operation. Smaller bitline swings can lead to faster, lower power memory operation. With amplifier 1100, the offset on bitlines can be canceled by the triple PMOS precharge-and-balance transistors (M3) 1101, (M4) 1102, (M5) 1103, which arrangement is known to those skilled in the art. However, despite precharge-and-balance transistors 1101-1103, an additional offset at the inputs of the latch may exist. By employing balancing PMOS transistor (M14) 1110, any offset that may be present at the input of the latch-type differential sense amplifier can be substantially equalized. Sense amplifier 1100 demonstrates a charge-sharing limited swing driver 1115. Global bitlines 1150, 1151 are disconnected from sense amplifier 1100 when sense amplifier 1100 is not being used, i.e., in a tri-state condition. Sense amplifier 1100 can be in a precharged state if both input/output nodes are logic HIGH, i.e., if both of the PMOS drivers, (M38) 1130 and (M29) 1131 are off (inputs at logic HIGH). A large capacitor, (C<sub>0</sub>) 1135, in sense amplifier 1100 can be kept substantially at zero volts by two series NMOS transistors, (M37) 1140 and (M40) 1141. The size of capacitor 1135 can be determined by the amount of voltage swing typically needed on global bitlines 1120, 1121.

When sense amplifier 1100 is activated, and bitlines 1150, 1151 are logic HIGH, PMOS transistor (M29) 1131 is turned on and

1 global bit\_n 1150 is discharged with a limited swing. When a bit  
 to be read is logic LOW, PMOS transistor (M38) 1130 is turned on,  
 and the global bit 1151 is discharged with a limited swing. This  
 charge-sharing scheme can result in very little power  
 consumption, because only the charge that causes the limited  
 voltage swing on the global bitlines 1150, 1151 is discharged to  
 ground. That is, there is substantially no "crowbar" current.  
 Furthermore, this aspect of the present invention can be useful  
 in memories where the global bitlines are multiplexed for input  
 10 and output.

#### Module-tier Memory Redundancy Implementation

In FIG. 12, memory structure 1200, composed of hierarchical  
 functional memory modules 1201 is preferred to have at least one  
 15 or more redundant memory rows 1202, 1204; one, or more redundant  
 memory columns 1206, 1208; or both, within each module 1201. It  
 is preferred that the redundant memory rows 1202, 1204, and/or  
 columns 1206, 1208 be paired, because it has been observed that  
 bit cell failures tend to occur in pairs. Module-level  
 20 redundancy, as shown in FIG. 12, where redundancy is implemented  
 using a preselected number of redundant memory rows 1202, 1204,  
 or redundant memory columns 1206, 1208, within memory module  
 1201, can be a very area-efficient approach provided the typical  
 number of bit cell failures per module remains small. By  
 25 implementing only a single row 1202 or a single column 1206 or  
 both in memory module 1201, only one additional multiplexer is  
 needed for the respective row or column. Although it may be  
 simpler to provide redundant memory cell circuits that can be  
 activated during product testing during the manufacturing stage,  
 30 it may also be desirable to activate selected redundant memory  
 cells when the memory product is in service, e.g., during  
 maintenance or on-the-fly during product operation. Such  
 activation can be effected by numerous techniques and support  
 circuitry which are well-known in the art.

35

# 1 Redundant Module Memory Redundancy Implementation

As shown in FIG. 13, memory redundancy also may be implemented by providing redundant module 1301 to memory structure 1300, which is composed of primary modules 1304, 1305, 1306, 1307. Redundant module 1301 can be a one-for-one replacement of a failed primary module, e.g., module 1304. In another aspect of the invention, redundant module 1301 may be partitioned into smaller redundant memory segments 1310a-d with respective ones of segments 1310a-d being available as redundant memory cells, for example, for respective portions of primary memory modules 1304-1307 which have failed. The number of memory cells assigned to each segment 1310a-d in redundant memory module 1301, may be a fixed number, or may be flexibly allocatable to accommodate different numbers of failed memory circuits in respective primary memory modules 1304-1307.

## Memory Redundancy Device

FIG. 14 illustrates another aspect of the present invention which provides an implementation of row and column redundancy for a memory structure such as memory structure 100 in FIG. 1, or memory structure 300 in FIG. 3. This aspect of the present invention can be implemented by employing fuses that are programmable, for example, during production. Examples of such uses include metal fuses that are blown electrically, or by a focused laser; or a double-gated device, which can be permanently programmed. Although the technique can be applied to provide row redundancy, or column redundancy, or both, the present discussion will describe column redundancy in which both inputs and outputs may need the advantages of redundancy.

FIG. 14 shows an embodiment of this aspect of the invention herein having four pairs of columns 1402a-d with one redundant pair 1404. It is desirable to implement this aspect of the present invention as pairs of lines because a significant number of RAM failures occur in pairs, whether column or row. Nevertheless, this aspect of the present invention also

1 contemplates single line redundancy. In general, the number of  
fuses in fuse box 1403 used to provide redundancy can be  
logarithmically related to the number line pairs, e.g., column  
pairs:  $\log_2$  (number of column pairs), where the number of column  
5 pairs includes the redundant pairs as well. Because fuses tend  
to be large, their number should be minimized, thus the  
logarithmic relation is advantageous. Fuse outputs 1405 are fed  
into decoder circuits 1406a-d, e.g., one fuse output per column  
pair. A fuse output creates what is referred to herein as a  
10 "shift pointer". The shift pointer indicates the shift signal  
in the column pair to be made redundant, and subsequent column  
pairs can then be inactivated. It is desirable that the signals  
1405 from (fuse box 1410) are decoded to generate shift signal  
1412a-d at each column pair. When shift signal 1412a-d for a  
15 particular column pair 1402a-d location is selected, as decoded  
from fuse signals 1405, shift pointer 1412a-d is said to be  
pointing at this location. The shift signals for this column,  
and all subsequent columns to the right of the column of pair  
shift pointer also become inactive.

20 This aspect of the present invention can be illustrated  
additionally in FIG. 15A and FIG. 15B, by way of the  
aforementioned concept of "shift pointers." In FIG. 15A, three  
column pairs 1501, 1502, 1503, and one redundant column pair 1504  
are shown. The shift procedure is conceptually indicated by way  
25 of "line diagrams". The top lines 1505-1508 of the line diagrams  
are representative of columns 1501-1504 within the memory core  
while bottom line pairs 1509-1511 are the data input/output pairs  
from the input/output buffers. When a shift signal, such as a  
signal 1405 in FIG. 14, for a particular column pair 1501-1503  
30 is logical LOW, it is preferred that the data in 1509-1511 be  
connected to respective column 1501-1503 directly above it by  
multiplexers. FIG. 15B is illustrative of having a failed column  
state. When shift signal is logical HIGH, such as a signal 1405  
in FIG. 14, a failed column is indicated, such as column 1552.  
35 Active columns 1550, 1551 remain unfaulted, and continue to

1 receive their data via I/O lines 1554, 1555. However, because  
 column 1552 has failed, data from I/O buffer 1556 can be  
 multiplexed to the redundant column pair 1553. Diagrammatically,  
 it appears that data in are shifted left while data out from the  
 memory core columns are shifted right. By adjusting the location  
 of the shift pointer, which generally is determined by the state  
 of the fuses, the unused redundant column pair can be shifted to  
 coincide with a nonfunctional column, e.g., column 1552, thereby  
 repairing the column fault and boosting the fully functional  
 10 memory yield.

### Selector for Redundant Memory Circuits

FIG. 16 illustrates yet another aspect of the present  
 invention, in which selector 1600 is adapted to provide a form  
 15 of redundancy. Selector 1600 can include a primary decoder  
 circuit 1605, which may be a global word line decoder, which is  
 coupled with a multiplexer 1610. MUX 1610 can be activated by  
 a (redundancy circuit) 1620, which may be a fuse system,  
 programable memory, or other circuit capable of providing an  
 20 activation signal 1630 to selector 1600 via MUX 1610. Selector  
 1600 is suitable for implementing module-level redundancy, such  
 as that described relative to module 1200 in FIG. 12, which may  
 be row redundancy or column redundancy for a given  
 implementation. In the ordinary course of operation, input word  
 25 line signal 1650 is decoded in decoder circuit 1605 and, in the  
 absence of a fault on local word line 1670, the word line signal  
 is passed to first local line 1680. In the event a fault is  
 detected, MUX 1610, selects second local line 1660, which is  
 preferred to be a redundant word line.

### Fast Decoder with Row Redundancy

FIG. 17 illustrates a preferred embodiment of selector 1600  
 in FIG. 16, in the form of decoder 1700 with row redundancy as  
 realized in a hierarchical memory environment. Decoder 1700 may  
 35 be particularly suitable for implementing module-level

1 redundancy, such as that described relative to module 1200 in  
 FIG. 12. Global decoder 1700, can operate similarly to the  
 manner of asynchronously-resettable decoder 800 of FIG. 8. In  
 general, decoder 1700 can be coupled with a first, designated  
 5 memory row, and a second, alternative memory row. Although the  
 second row may be a physical row adjacent the first memory row,  
 and another of the originally designated rows of the memory  
 module, the second row also may be a redundant row which is  
 implemented in the module. Although row decoder 1700 decodes the  
 10 first memory row under normal operations, it also is disposed to  
 select and decode the second memory row in responsive to an  
 alternative-row-select signal. Where the second row is a  
 redundant row, it may be more suitable to deem the selection  
 signal to be a "redundant-row-select" signal. The aforementioned  
 15 row select signals are illustrated as inputs 1701 and 1702.

Thus, when input 1701 or 1702 is activated, decoder 1700  
 transfers the local word line signal, usually output on WL 1706,  
 to be output on xL\_Next 1705, which is coupled with an adjacent  
 word line. In general, when a word line decoder, positioned at  
 20 a particular location in a memory module, receives a shift  
 signal, the remaining decoders subsequent to that decoder also  
 shift, so that the last decoder in the sequence shifts its  
 respective WL data to a redundant word line. Using a two-  
 dimensional conceptual model where a redundant row is at the  
 25 bottom of a model, this process may be described as having a  
 fault at a particular position effect a downward shift of all  
 local word lines at and below the position of the fault. Those  
 local word lines above the position of the fault can remain  
 unchanged.

### 30 Hybrid Single Port and Dual Port (R/W) Functionality

Hierarchical memory module implementations realize  
 significant time savings due in part to localized functionality.  
 Signal propagation times at the local module tier tend to be  
 35 substantially less than the typical access time of a larger



1 memory structure, even those employing existing paged, banked,  
and segmented memory array, and register file schemes. Indeed,  
both read and write operations performed at the fundamental  
module tier can occur within a fraction of the overall memory  
5 structure access time. Furthermore, because bitline sensing, in  
accordance with the present invention, is power-conservative, and  
does not result in a substantial decay of precharge voltages, the  
bitline voltage levels after an operation tend to be marginally  
reduced. As a result, in certain preferred embodiments of the  
10 present invention, it is possible to perform two operations  
back-to-back without an intervening pre-charge cycle, and to do  
so within a single access cycle of the overall memory structure.  
Therefore, although a memory device may be designed as to be  
single-port device, a preferred memory module embodiment  
15 functions similarly to a two-port memory device, which can afford  
such an embodiment a considerable advantage over prior art memory  
structures of comparable overall memory size.

FIG. 18 illustrates one particular embodiment of this aspect  
of the present invention, in memory structure 1800, where both  
20 local bitline sensing and local word line decoding are used, as  
described above. Memory structure 1800 includes memory module  
1805 which is coupled with local word line decoder 1815 and local  
bit sense amplifier 1820. Within memory module 1805 are a  
predefined number of memory cells, for example, memory cell (1825),  
25 which is coupled with local word line decoder 1815 via (local word  
line 1810) and local bit sense amplifier 1820 via local bitlines  
1830. With typical single-port functionality, local bitlines  
1830 are precharged prior to both READ and WRITE operations.  
During a typical READ operation, predecoder 1835 activates the  
30 appropriate global word line decoder 1840, which, in turn,  
activates local word line decoder 1815. Once local word line  
decoder 1815 determines that associated memory cell 1825 is to  
be evaluated, it opens (memory cell 1825) for evaluation, and  
activates local bit sense amplifier 1820. At the end of the  
35 local sensing period, local bit sense amplifier 1820 outputs the

1 sensed data value onto global bitlines 1845. After global sense  
amplifier 1850 senses the data value, the data is output to the  
I/O buffer 1855. If a WRITE operation is to follow the READ  
operation, a typical single-port device would perform another  
5 precharge operation before the WRITE operation can commence.

In this particular embodiment of dual-port functionality,  
the predecoding step of a subsequent WRITE operation can commence  
essentially immediately after local bitline sense amplifier 1820  
completes the evaluation of (memory cell 1825,) that is, at the  
10 inception of sensing cycle for global sense amplifier 1850, and  
prior to the data being available to I/O buffer 1855. Thus,  
during the period encompassing the operation of global sense  
amplifier 1850 and I/O buffer 1855, and while the READ operation  
is still in progress, predecoder 1835 can receive and decode the  
15 address signals for a subsequent WRITE operation, and activate  
global word line decoder 1840 accordingly. In turn, global word  
line decoder 1840 activates local word line 1815 in anticipation  
of the impending WRITE operation. As soon as the datum is read  
out of I/O buffer 1855, the new datum associated with the WRITE  
20 cycle can be admitted to I/O buffer 1855 and immediately written  
to, for example, memory cell 1825, without a prior precharge  
cycle. In order to provide the memory addresses for these READ  
and WRITE operations in a manner consistent with this embodiment  
of the invention, it is preferred that the clocking cycle of  
25 predecoder 1810 be faster than the access cycle of the overall  
memory structure 1800. For example, it may be desirable to adapt  
the predecoding clock cycle to be about twice, or perhaps greater  
than twice, the nominal access cycle for structure 1800. In this  
manner, a PRECHARGE-READ-WRITE operation can be performed upon  
30 the same memory cell within the same memory module in less than  
one access cycle, thereby obtaining dual-port functionality from  
a single port device. It also is contemplated that the  
aforementioned embodiment can be adapted to realize three or more  
operations within a single access cycle, as permitted by the  
35 unused time during an access cycle.

1 Fortuitously, the enhanced functionality described above is particularly suited to large memory structures with comparatively small constituent modules, where the disparity between global and local access times is more pronounced. Moreover, in environments  
5 where delays due to signal propagation across interconnections, and to signal propagation delays through co-embedded logic components may result in sufficient idle time for a memory structure, this enhanced functionality may advantageously make use of otherwise "wasted" time.

10 FIG. 19 illustrates high precision delay measurement (HPDM) circuit (1900), according to one aspect of the present invention, which can provide timing measurements of less than that of a single gate delay, relative to the underlying technology. These measurements can be, for example, of signal delays and periods,  
15 pulse widths, clock skews, etc. HPDM circuit (1900) also can provide pulse, trigger, and timing signals to other circuits, including sense amplifiers, word line decoders, clock devices, synchronizers, state machines, and the like. Indeed, HPDM circuit (1900) is a measurement circuit of widespread applicability. For example, HPDM circuit (1900) can be implemented within a high-performance microprocessor, where accurate measurement of internal time intervals, perhaps on the order of a few picoseconds, can be very difficult using devices external to the microprocessor. HPDM circuit (1900) can be used to  
25 precisely measure skew between and among signals, and thus also can be used to introduce or eliminate measured skew intervals. HPDM circuit (1900) also can be employed to characterize the signals of individual components, which may be unmatched, or poorly-matched components, as well as to bring such components  
30 into substantial synchrony. Furthermore, HPDM circuit (1900) can advantageously be used in register files, transceivers, adaptive circuits, and a myriad of other applications in which precise interval measurement is desirable in itself, and in the context of adapting the behavior of components, circuits, and systems,  
35 responsive to those measured intervals.

1 Advantageously, HPDM circuit (1900) can be devised to be  
responsive to operating voltage, design and process variations,  
design rule scaling, etc., relative to the underlying technology,  
including, without limitation, bipolar, nMOS, CMOS, BiCMOS, and  
5 GaAs technologies. Thus, an HPDM circuit (1900) designed to  
accurately measure intervals relevant to 1.8 micron technology  
will scales in operation to accurately measure intervals relevant  
to 0.18 micron technology. Although HPDM circuit 1900 can be  
adapted to measure fixed time intervals, and thus remain  
10 independent of process variations, design rule scaling, etc., it  
is preferred that HPDM circuit (1900) be allowed to respond to the  
technology and design rules at hand. In general, the core of an  
effective HPDM circuit capable of measuring intervals on the  
order of picoseconds, can require only a few scores of  
15 transistors which occupy a minimal footprint. This is in stark  
contrast to its counterpart in the human-scale domain, i.e., a  
an expensive, high-precision handheld, or bench side, electronic  
test device.

One feature of HPDM circuit (1900) is modified ring oscillator  
20 1905. As is well-known in the art of ring oscillators, the  
oscillation period,  $T_o$ , of a ring oscillator having  $N$  stages is  
approximately equal to  $2NT_d$ , where  $T_d$  is the large-signal delay  
of the gate/inverter of each stage. The predetermined  
oscillation period,  $T_o$ , can be chosen by selecting the number of  
25 gates to be employed in the ring oscillator. In general,  $T_d$  is  
a function of the rise and fall times associated with a gate  
which, in turn, are related to the underlying parameters  
including, for example, gate transistor geometries and  
fabrication process. These parameters are manipulable such that  
30  $T_d$  can be tuned to deliver a predetermined gate delay time. In a  
preferred embodiment of the present invention in the context of  
a specific embodiment of a hierarchical memory structure, it is  
desirable that the parameters be related to a CMOS device  
implementation using 0.18 micron ( $\mu\text{m}$ ) design rules. However, a  
35 skilled artisan would realize that HPDM circuit (1900) is not

1 limited thereto, and can be employed in other technologies,  
including, without limitation, bipolar, nMOS, CMOS, BiCMOS, GaAs,  
and SiGe technologies, regardless of design rule, and  
irrespective of whether implemented on Si substrate, SOI and its  
5 variants, etc.

Although exemplary HPDM circuit (1900) employs seven (7) stage  
ring oscillator 1905, a greater or lesser number of stages may  
be used, depending upon the desired oscillation frequency. In  
this example, ring oscillator 1905 includes NAND gate 1910, the  
10 output of which being designated as the first stage output 1920;  
and six inverter gates, 1911-1916, whose outputs 1921-1926 are  
respectively designated as the second through seventh stage  
outputs.

In addition to ring oscillator 1905, HPDM circuit (1900) can  
15 include memory elements 1930-1937, each of which being coupled  
with a preselected oscillator stage. The selection and  
arrangement of memory elements 1930-1937, make it possible to  
measure a minimum time quantum,  $T_L$ , which is accurate to about  
one-half of a gate delay, that is,  $T_L \approx T_D/2$ . The maximum length  
20 of time,  $T_M$ , that can usefully be measured by HPDM circuit 1900  
is determinable by selecting one or more memory devices, or  
counters, to keep track of the number of oscillation cycles  
completed since the activation of oscillator 1905, for example,  
by ENABLE signal 1940. Where the selected counter is a single  
25 3-bit device, for example, up to eight (8) complete cycles  
through oscillator 1905 can be detected, with each cycle being  
completed in  $T_0$  time. Therefore, using the single three-bit  
counter as an example,  $T_M \approx 8T_0$ . The remaining memory elements  
1932-1937 can be used to indicate the point during a particular  
30 oscillator cycle at which ENABLE signal 1940 was deactivated, as  
determined by examining the respective states of given memory  
elements 1932-1937 after deactivation of oscillator 1905.

In HPDM circuit (1900,) it is preferred that a  $k$ -bit positive  
edge-triggered counter (PET) 1930, and a  $k$ -bit negative edge-  
35 triggered counter (NET) 1931, be coupled with first stage output

1 1920. Further, it is preferred that a dual edge-triggered  
 counter (DET) 1932-1937 be coupled with respective outputs 1921-  
 1925 of Oscillator 1905. In a particular embodiment of the  
 invention, PET 1930 and NET 1931 are each selected to be three-  
 5 bit counters (i.e.,  $k = 3$ ), and each of DET 1932-1937 are  
 selected to be one-bit counters (latches). An advantage of using  
 dual edge detection in counters 1932-1937 is that the edge of a  
 particular oscillation signal propagating through ring oscillator  
 1905 can be registered at all stages, and the location of the  
 10 oscillation signal at a specific time can be determined  
 therefrom. Because a propagating oscillation signal alternates  
 polarity during sequentially subsequent passages through ring  
 oscillator 1905, it is preferred to employ both NET circuit 1930  
 and PET 1931, and that the negative edge of a particular  
 15 oscillation signal be sensed as the completion of the first  
 looping event, or cycle, through ring oscillator 1905.

The operation of HPDM circuit 1900 can be summarized as  
 follows: with EnableL signal 1904 asserted HIGH, ring oscillator  
 1905 is in the STATIC mode, so that setting ResetL signal 1906  
 20 to LOW resets counters 1930-1937. By setting StartH signal 1907  
 to HIGH, sets RS flip-flop 1908 which, in turn, sets ring  
 oscillator 1905 to the ACTIVE mode by propagating an oscillation  
 signal. Each edge of the oscillation signal can be traced by  
 identifying the switching activity at each stage output 1920-  
 25 1926. PET 1930 and NET 1931, which sense first stage output 1920  
 identify and count looping events. It is preferred that the  
 maximum delay to be measured can be represented by the maximum  
 count of PET 1930 and NET 1931, so that the counters do not  
 overflow. To stop the propagation of the oscillation signal  
 30 through ring oscillator 1905, StopL signal 1909 is set LOW, RS  
 flip-flop 1908 is reset, and ring oscillator 1905 is returned to  
 the STATIC mode of operation. Also, the data in counters 1930-  
 1937 are isolated from output stages 1920-1926 by setting enL  
 signal 1950 to LOW and enH signal 1951 to HIGH. The digital data  
 35 is then read out through ports lpos 1955, lneg 1956, and del

1 1957. With knowledge of the average stage delay, the digital data  
then can be interpreted to provide an accurate measurement, in  
real time units, of the interval during which ring oscillator  
1905 was in the ACTIVE mode of operation. HPDM circuit (1900) can  
5 be configured to provide, for example, a precise clock or  
triggering signal, such as TRIG signal 1945, after the passage  
of a predetermined quantum of time. Within the context of a  
memory system, such quantum of time can be, for example, the time  
necessary to sense the state of a memory cell, to keep active a  
10 wordline, etc.

The average stage delay through stages 1910-1916 can be  
determined by operating ring oscillator 1905 for a predetermined  
averaging time by asserting *StartH* 1907 and *StopL* 1909 to HIGH,  
thereby incrementing counters 1930-1937. In a preferred  
15 embodiment of the present invention, the overflow of NET 1931 is  
tracked, with each overflow event being indicative of  $2^k$  looping  
events through ring oscillator 1905. It is preferred that this  
tracking be effected by a divider circuit, for example, DIVIDE-  
BY-64 circuit 1953. At the end of the predetermined averaging  
20 time, data from divider 1953 may be read out through port  
RO\_div64 1954 as a waveform, and then analyzed to determine the  
average oscillator stage delay. However, a skilled artisan would  
realize that the central functionality of HPDM circuit (1900),  
i.e., to provide precise measurement of a predetermined time  
25 quantum, would remain unaltered if DIVIDE-BY-64 circuit 1953, or  
similar divider circuit, were not included therein.

HPDM circuit (1900) can be used for many timing applications  
whether or not in the context of a memory structure, for example,  
to precisely shape pulsed waveforms and duty cycles; to skew, de-  
30 skew across one or more clocked circuits, or to measure the skew  
of such circuits; to provide high-precision test data; to  
indicate the beginning, end, or duration of a signal or event;  
and so forth. Furthermore, HPDM circuit (1900) can be applied to  
innumerable electronic devices other than memory structures,  
35 where precise timing measurement is desired.

1 Accurate self-timed circuits are important features of  
robust, low-power memories. Replica bitline techniques have been  
described in the prior art to match the timing of control  
circuits and sense amplifiers to the memory cell characteristics,  
5 over wide variations in process, temperature, and operation  
voltage. One of the problems with some prior art schemes is that  
split dummy bitlines cluster word-lines together into groups, and  
thus only one word-line can be activated during a memory cycle.  
Before a subsequent activation of a word-line within the same  
10 group, the dummy bitlines must be precharged, creating an  
undesirable delay. The diffusion replica delay technique of the  
present invention substantially matches the capacitance of a  
dummy bitline by using a diffusion capacitor, preferably for each  
row. Some prior art techniques employed replica bit-columns  
15 which can add to undesirable operational delays. FIG. 20  
illustrates the diffusion replica timing circuit 2000 which  
includes transistor 2005 and diffusion capacitance 2010. It is  
desirable that transistor 2005 be an NMOSFET transistor which,  
preferably, is substantially identical to an access transistor  
20 chain, if such is used in the memory cells of the memory  
structure (not shown). It also is desirable that the capacitance  
of diffusion capacitor 2010 is substantially matched to the  
capacitance of the associated bitline (not shown). This  
capacitance can be a predetermined ratio of the total bitline  
25 capacitance, with the ratio of the diffusion capacitance to total  
bitline capacitance remaining substantially constant over  
process, temperature and voltage variations. The total bitline  
capacitance can include both the bitline metal and diffusion  
capacitances. In this fashion, all rows in a memory device which  
30 use timing circuit 2000 can be independently accessible with  
substantially fully-operation self-timing, even when another row  
in the same memory module has been activated, and is not yet  
precharged. Thus, write-after-read operations may be multiplexed  
into a memory module without substantial access time or area  
35 penalties. Thus, it is desirable to employ diffusion replica



1 delay circuit 2000 in a memory structure such as memory structure  
1800, described in FIG. 18. Diffusion replica delay circuit 2000  
can be used to determine the decay time of a bitline before a  
sense amplifier is activated, halting the decay on the bitline.  
5 In this manner, bitline decay voltage can be limited to a  
relatively small magnitude, thus saving power and decreasing  
memory access time. Furthermore, timing circuit 2000 can be used  
to accurately generate many timing signals in a memory structure  
such as structure 1800 in FIG. 18, including, without limitation,  
10 precharge, write, and shut-off timing signals.

FIG. 21 illustrates an embodiment of the diffusion replica  
delay circuit 2000 in FIG. 20. Word-line activation of a memory  
cell frequency is pulsed to limit the voltage swing on the high  
capacitance bitlines, in order to minimize power consumption,  
15 particularly in wide word length memory structures. In order to  
accurately control the magnitude of a bitline voltage swing,  
dummy bitlines can be used. It is desirable that these dummy  
bitlines have a capacitance which is a predefined fraction of the  
actual bitline capacitance. In such a device, the capacitance  
20 ratio between dummy bitlines and real bitlines can affect the  
voltage swing on the real bitlines. In prior art devices using  
dummy bitlines, a global dummy bitline for a memory block having  
a global reset loop has been utilized. Such prior art schemes  
using global resetting tends to deliver pulse widths of a  
25 duration substantially equivalent to the delay of global word-  
line drivers. Such an extend pulse width allows for a bitline  
voltage swing which can be in excess of what actually is required  
to activate a sense amplifier. This is undesirable in fast  
memory structures, because the additional, and unnecessary,  
30 voltage swing translates into a slower structure with greater  
power requirements. In one aspect of the present invention,  
dummy bitlines are preferably partitioned such that the local  
bitlines generally exhibit a small capacitance and a short  
discharge time. Word-line pulse signals of very short duration  
35 (e.g., 500 ps or less) are desirable in order to limit the

1 bitline voltage swing. It also may be desirable to provide local  
 5 reset of split dummy bitlines to provide very short word-line  
 pulses. Replica word-line 2110 can be used to minimize the delay  
 between activation of memory cell 2120 and related sense  
 10 amplifier 2130. Such local signaling is preferred over global  
 signal distribution on relatively long, highly capacitive word-  
 lines. Word-line 2140 activates dummy cell 2150 along with  
 associated memory cell 2120, which is to be accessed. Dummy cell  
 2150 can be part of dummy column 2160 which may be split into  
 15 small groups (for example, eight or sixteen groups). The size  
 of each split dummy group can be changed to adjust the voltage  
 swing on the bitline. When a dummy bitline is completely  
 discharged, (reset signal 2170) can be locally generated which  
 pulls word-line 2140 substantially to ground.

15 FIG. 22A illustrates controlled voltage swing data bus  
 circuit (CVS) 2200 which can be useful in realizing lower power,  
 high speed, and dense interconnection buses. CVS 2200 can reduce  
 bus power consumption by imposing a limited, controlled voltage  
 swing on bus 2215. In an essential configuration, (CVS 2000) can  
 20 include inverter 2205, pMOS pass transistor T2 2210, and one nMOS  
 discharge transistor, such as transistor T1a 2205a. Both  
 transistors T1a 2205a, and T2 2210 can be programmed to control  
 the rate and extent of voltage swings on bus 2215 such that a  
 first preselected bus operational characteristic is provided in  
 25 response to input signal 2220a. Additional discharge transistors  
 T1b 2205b and T1c 2205c can be coupled with pass transistor T2  
 2210, and individually programmed to respectively provide a  
 second preselected bus operational characteristic, as well as a  
 third preselected bus operational characteristic, responsive to  
 30 respective input signals 2220b, 2220c. The preselected bus  
 operational characteristic can be for example, the rate of  
 discharge of the bus voltage through the respective discharge  
 transistor T1a 2205a, T1b 2205b, and T1c 2205c, such that bus  
 2215 is disposed to provide encoded signals, or multilevel logic,  
 35 thereon. For example, as depicted in FIG. 22A, CVS 2200 can

1 provide three distinct logic levels. Additional discharge  
 transistors, programmed to provide yet additional logic levels  
 also may be used. Thus, it is possible for bus 2215 to replace  
 two or more lines. Concurrently with effecting a reduction in  
 power consumption, the limited bus voltage swing advantageously  
 tends to increase the speed of the bus.

FIG. 22B illustrates a bidirectional data bus transfer  
 circuit (DBDT) 2250 which employs cross-linked inverters I1 2260  
 and I2 2270 to couple BUS 1 2252 with BUS 2 2254. It is  
 desirable to incorporate a clocked charge/discharge circuit with  
 DBDT 2250. Coupled with inverter I1 2260 is clocked charge  
 transistor MPC1 2266 and clocked discharge transistor MNC1 2268.  
 Similarly, inverter I2 2270 is coupled with clocked charge  
 transistor MPC2 2276 and clocked discharge transistor MNC2 2278.  
 Transistors MPC1 2266, MNC1 2268, MPC2 2276, and MNC2 2278 are  
 preferred to be driven by clock signal 2280.

Beginning with clock signal 2280 going LOW, charge  
 transistors MPC1 2266 and MPC2 2276 turn ON, allowing BUS 1 input  
 node 2256 and BUS 2 input node 2258 to be precharged to HIGH.  
 Additionally, discharge transistors MNC1 2268 and MNC2 2278 are  
 turned OFF, so that no substantial discharge occurs. By taking  
 input nodes 2256, 2258 to HIGH, respective signals propagate  
 through, and are inverted by inverters I1 2260 and I2 2270  
 providing a LOW signal to BUS 1 pass transistor MP12 2262 and BUS  
 2 pass MP22 2272, respectively, allowing the signal on BUS 1 2252  
 to be admitted to input node 2256, and then to pass through to  
 BUS2 input node 2258 to BUS 2 2254, and vice versa. When clock  
 signal 2280 rises to HIGH, both charge transistors MPC1 2266 and  
 MPC2 2276 turn OFF, and discharge transistors MNC1 2268 and MNC2  
 2278 turn ON, latching the data onto BUS 1 2252 and BUS 2 2254.  
 Upon the next LOW phase of clock signal 2280, a changed signal  
 value on either BUS 1 2252 or BUS 2 2254 will propagate between  
 the buses.

Many alterations and modifications may be made by those  
 having ordinary skill in the art without departing from the

1 spirit and scope of the invention. Therefore, it must be  
understood that the illustrated embodiments have been set forth  
only for the purposes of example, and that it should not be taken  
as limiting the invention as defined by the following claims. The  
5 following claims are, therefore, to be read to include not only  
the combination of elements which are literally set forth but all  
equivalent elements for performing substantially the same  
function in substantially the same way to obtain substantially  
the same result. The claims are thus to be understood to include  
10 what is specifically illustrated and described above, what is  
conceptually equivalent, and also what incorporates the essential  
idea of the invention.

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